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NEW YORK POST

METRO
EDITION

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SUNDAY

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New York Post, Sunday, June 23, 2024



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OPEN MIKE

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A FEW people reached out the past couple days, surprised that I didn't write a Father's Day column last week. Fact is, I wanted to save it a week for reasons you are about to see. And that decision, as you will also see, probably proved fortuitous.

I wanted to wait because next Saturday will mark the 50th anniversary of the first baseball game I ever attended in person. I was 7 years old. My father took me, of course. We did what we would do for almost every Mets game we ever attended: We parked the car at my grandmother's house on 51st Avenue in Corona, she made us a few sandwiches to go, and we hoofed it the couple of blocks to Shea Stadium.

It was June 29, 1974. I cannot tell you where my wallet is located right now. I'm iffy on the status of my iPhone. My car keys? Fifty-fifty. But I can recount — as if I'm looking at the home movie — every minute of that day, every second, warehoused in my memory.

From the moment Shea came into view, I'm not sure I blinked. The enormity of it, the odd orange-and-blue tiles randomly affixed to the exterior. And the blinding green of the grass inside. We took our seats. It was Old-Timers' Day at Shea, so we had gotten there early, so my dad started pointing out everything he thought I should know.

"That's the dugout."

"That's the bullpen."

"That's the batting cage."

"That's where they keep the tarp rolled up."

"That's the press box."

Here's one of the reasons it was important for me to write about that this week.



ONE DOWN, THOUSANDS TO GO: On June 29, 1974, The Post's Mike Vaccaro made his first visit to Shea Stadium along with his father, to watch the Mets beat St. Louis, 4-0. AP

Trip to Shea 50 years ago started lifelong relationship with baseball

My reply to that one was: "What's a press box?" He explained that's where the sportswriters went to write their stories about the game we were about to watch.

next Monday, and for the next 11 years, he would come home and hand me The Post, and I would absorb every word.

By that first Thursday — again, swear this is true — I announced at dinner: "I want to be a sports columnist for the New York Post when I grow up."

So when I occasionally mention that I have my dream job ... I am deadly se-

rious. From when I was 7.

The other indelible thing that happened that day: At the very end of the introduction of the Old Timers, in from center field, together, walked Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Duke Snider and Willie Mays. It was an electric moment. I'd never heard sound of any kind as intense as the roar that filled old Shea. But then I turned to my father and

saw something I'd never seen before.

He was crying.

"I'm not sad," he said. "Just the opposite. These were the guys who made up most of my childhood."

Then he explained: Joe D. was his all-time favorite, and always would be, and he explained why. He lauded Mickey. He praised the Duke.

"But Willie," he said, "was the best that ever played the game, in my mind. Best I ever saw in person anyway."

The game? Well, Cleon Jones and Wayne Garrett hit home runs, and the Mets won 4-0. Jon Matlack threw a one-hitter — the only hit a single by, of all people, the opposing pitcher, John Curtis.

"You have no idea what you almost just saw," my father said, shaking his head, as we walked back to my grandmother's house.

"I'm sure I'll see one eventually," I said.

(SPOILER ALERT: I have now attended about 5,000 baseball games in the past 50 years, give or take. I scrambled to the press box of the last inning of Johan Santana's no-no. I still haven't seen a full one. And it's getting late early out here.)

Fifty years. And it's funny. I wanted to include a picture of the ticket stub, which I still have, but it is permanently affixed in a scrapbook and there was no way to remove it without tearing it. The one pictured here looks just like it, I assure you. It'll have to do. You need to respect the most sacred artifacts, after all, at all costs.